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AUTHOR Higbee, Paul S.
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ABSTRACT

The Rural School and Community Development Project encourages South Dakota rural schools to take roles in local economic planning. This booklet profiles 3 of the project's 12 pilot schools: Takini School on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, Estelline, and Belle Fourche. The three communities differ greatly in their histories, lifestyles, economic bases, and expectations. The specific methods of developing school-community alliances in these three cases are less important than the spirit of experimentation behind the methods. In Estelline, the community has become a classroom. With encouragement of the local development corporation, a new elective high school class--Rural Economics--allows students to learn about local businesses and their hometown and encourages student entrepreneurship. Takini--a K-12 reservation school planned by federal bureaucrats--was sited equidistant from three towns and has no town of its own. Nevertheless, with parent and tribal support, the school plans to build an auxiliary building surrounding an arena, to be used for community rodeos and powwows. Classrooms will have "storefront" openings onto the arena, which students can use for running food concessions and selling items such as horse halters. In Belle Fourche, a "classroom without walls" approach has led to high school students surveying the local business climate, mapping the town for the 1990 census, writing for the local paper and radio station, and completing requirements for a town listing in the governor's directory for national business recruitment. (SV)

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Rural Experiment

How Three South Dakota Schools Are Opening Doors To Their Communities. . . Exploring Business Partnerships, Professional Alliances, Functional Building Designs, And Expanded Learning Environments For The Information Age.

BY PAUL S. HIGBEE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Rural Experiment

By Paul S. Higbee

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Cover photos: banker David Johnson and student Brandi Lamster in Estelline, view of Belle Fourche, and the Takini playground.

Introduction

I drove across South Dakota in the spring of 1990 and talked to rural teachers, students, mayors, bankers, counselors, shop owners, farmers and ranchers. In classrooms and over coffee in Main Street cafes we discussed an issue making national news: How should schools be restructured to prepare students for the information age?

These people defined "information age" not just in terms of access to technical data. They spoke of information needed to function as community members, in rural or urban settings. I heard them describe how understanding your own culture could be a foundation for understanding others in a global market.

They put a human face on the information age. They talked a lot about "community."

I understood why. While most Americans can take their community's existence for granted, some of these people nearly lost theirs during the 1980's agricultural crisis. Many spoke of a renewed commitment to making certain their towns survive. Schools can play a part, they said.

Some said the farm crisis opened their eyes to a national education system that makes rural lifestyles seem irrelevant, that defines student success as being equipped to get away from small towns and into urban careers. Belle Fourche school superintendent Jim Doolittle talked about people in his town who are embarrassed to go to a local school reunion "because they didn't succeed in getting out."

More disturbing were stories I heard on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation about boarding schools that, for a century, told students their cultural makeup was irrelevant.

The schools in this booklet are turning to their local communities to determine what is relevant and to expand their learning environments.

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Before making this trip I met with Dr. Daryl Hobbs, director of the University of Missouri's Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis and researcher in school restructuring.

Hobbs differentiates between traditional "schooling" and "education" appropriate for the information age. He feels we need educational environments connected to communities, and teachers able to pull people and other resources from those communities to keep pace with rapidly evolving information. Hobbs sees active learners taking more responsibility for their learning. Students should help plan their education and view it as a process which doesn't end at graduation. He says we need educational administrators sensitive to student and community uniqueness, and a society that expects schools to turn out people capable of change.

Teachers I talked to understood Hobbs' ideas. They could cite ways they are already plugged into their communities... not because of any special inventive qualities, but out of need. South Dakota's teachers are the nation's lowest paid. In rural schools they often teach a wide range of subjects with limited budgets for materials. They need all the help they can get. They said one advantage they may have are small classes which help students become participatory, active learners.

Students I met like the idea of helping plan their own education. They said they probably feel less intimidated by the information age than adults. Most had good feelings about their home towns. They talked about family and friends, individual attention in school, about feeling safe in their towns. If they felt limited it was mainly because of few local career choices. Some said they felt better about rural lifestyles than their parents' generation.

Business people agreed with Hobbs about schools preparing people who can change. They told me some small towns won't survive but rural America as a whole will. Towns that survive will be those capable of changing to be more than just farm and ranch towns. There's no getting around the fact that more efficient agricultural technology means fewer farmers and ranchers on the land. Some business people felt schools needed to do more to help adults make career changes.

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This booklet profiles three South Dakota schools and their communities: Estelline, Takini School on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, and Belle Fourche. They were among 12 pilot schools in South Dakota in the Rural School and Community Development project, coordinated by the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory and Black Hills Special Services Cooperative. The project encourages schools to take roles in local economic planning, so the three had a jump on most schools in forming community alliances.

Readers unfamiliar with South Dakota might assume one small town here could represent all the rest. It isn't so. These three communities claim vastly different histories, lifestyles, economic bases, and expectations. The specific methods by which they are opening doors to their communities are of lesser importance than the spirit of experimentation behind the methods. The methods may not translate from town to town at all, but the spirit of experimentation is essential.

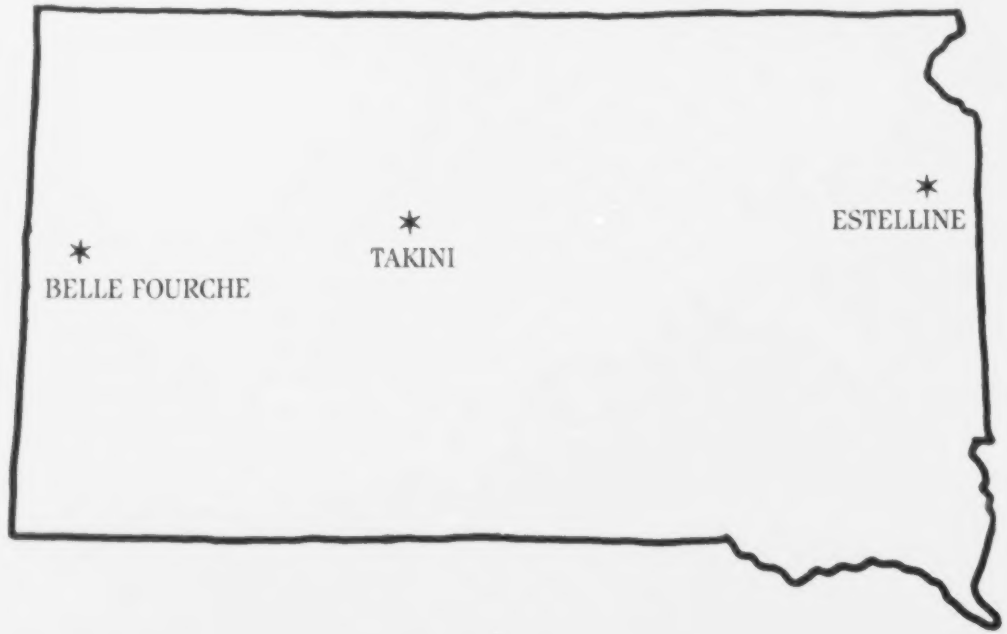
Two things impressed me above all else on the trip.

First, people in all three communities stressed that school restructuring should take into account not only "the best and the brightest," but the needs of youth with problems. Governor George Mickelson echoed that sentiment, telling me, "The top priority in South Dakota is at-risk youth" ...youth at risk for juvenile crime, youth unemployment, illiteracy, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and dropping out.

Second, I was impressed by the frankness of people I interviewed. They told me not only what they liked about their towns but also what angers and frustrates them. When I offered to keep their remarks anonymous, they said they'd stand by their opinions.

It's easy to see qualities like that and fall into the trap of feeling nostalgic about rural America. But there are lessons here for our future.

— Paul Higbee



ESTELLINE: The community becomes a classroom

Few people wear just one hat in Estelline. Mayor Earl Colberg, discussing the town's economy from behind the counter in his auto parts shop, excuses himself to help a customer find an engine belt.

"The big things here are our doctor and hospital," he says after ringing up the sale.

Estelline has changed from primarily a farm town to a service community the past 25 years. The town owns a 12-bed hospital and 62-bed nursing home. Those services, says Colberg, have earned Estelline a reputation as a good retirement place. Because of the hospital and nursing home the town itself is the largest employer, supplying 110 jobs. The 1980 census counted 719 residents and the 1990 census may show 750.

Retirement money, agriculture, and visitors who buy gas and food enroute to nearby lakes and state parks help keep 37 businesses open. Every store along the two-block Main Street business district is occupied: Fred and Mary's Cafe, a weekly paper, two hardware stores, a beautician, a locally owned bank, and more.

David Johnson, Farmers' State bank president, says Estelline weathered the 1980's farm crisis well.

"We had very few farm bankruptcies," he says. "This is a conservative area that didn't overextend itself."

What's more, Estelline is pretty. It's 25 miles west of the Minnesota border amid rolling farm country and clear glacial lakes. Houses are nicely painted and yards neatly trimmed.

Still, people say, there's a feeling all this could fall apart. The economy is depressed. Five dollars an hour is considered good pay. Many people have to commute to jobs in Brookings or Watertown, 25 and 30 miles away. In Estelline $25,000 or $30,000 will buy a fine home even though housing is tight, "a seller's market." People worry about their property values falling even lower.

They worry, too, whether their children will be able to make a living here.

That concern got bank president Johnson active in the Estelline Area Development Corporation. He's a 1970 Estelline High School graduate who got his business training in Milwaukee and traveled the world. But he returned to Estelline. He and his wife restored a home on the National Register of Historic Sites. They love this land and lifestyle.

Estelline grain elevator

Johnson is realistic about how hard it is for small town development corporations to recruit outside businesses. The Estelline corporation hasn't given up on that kind of recruitment, but a year ago it took on a new project. What if young people could be taught about their home town, about how to think as entrepreneurs who might someday start their own local businesses? Development corporation member Linda Salmonson attended a week-long seminar, meeting with other small town educators and business people thinking along the same lines. She came home with good ideas. Julie Popham, a Spanish teacher whose husband serves on the development corporation, worked to get the school interested.

Johnson believes there are more young people than folks might guess who don't care about climbing corporate ladders or "living in a $150,000 home and driving a BMW." Some, he thinks, might define living close to the land among family and lifelong friends as success.

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Public school superintendent Errol Johnson (no relation to David) and high school principal Dennis Riekman liked the development corporation's idea.

Superintendent Johnson thinks his staff needs freedom to develop projects they believe in. "If it's worthwhile and they're enthused, that's the main thing," he says.

Teachers here are no strangers to leaping into new roles. Like the rest of Estelline they, too, typically wear more than one hat. One of the school district's major problems is keeping teachers certified to instruct many diverse courses. Joey Struwe, for example, found himself teaching economics, typing, earth science, physical education and health, and drivers' education during the 1989-90 term. He also coached track and basketball, taking the boys' high school basketball team to the state tournament for the first time in school history.

Principal Riekman knows that's a lot of work. He also feels some teachers thrive on "doing different things. They become more creative."

Joey Struwe

The busy Struwe was the teacher tapped to bring the development corporation's idea to reality, to design an elective high school class called Rural Economics for the 1990-91 term. He sees Estelline's business community becoming his classroom. Students will learn how business people got started. They may conduct business surveys for the development corporation and city council. They will probably be active in an effort to refurbish Main Street.

How is Estelline likely to react to this non-traditional learning, seeing students walking Main Street instead of sitting behind desks?

"The town will be more than supportive," predicts Julie Popham. "A lot of people here tell us school should be more life experiences."

Back on Main Street David Johnson agrees. He cites half a dozen Main Street businesses that, in the past five years, have passed into ownership by people in their 20s and 30s. "With that age group I think you'll have people very open to working with students," he says. "And students will be able to relate to the

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Twenty-five teachers work in the Estelline schools with 239 students, K-12. No teacher earns as much as $20,000 annually.

Most turn to the community as a teacher resource regularly, anything from bringing a local artist into the classroom to taking kids to the nursing home to hear local history from residents. After all, no one in Estelline is more than a ten minute walk away.

"In a small community you know most of the people who have expertise to share," says Barb Goodfellow, school counselor for all grades.

Goodfellow articulates well the attractive aspects of small town life, as well as the problems.

"You have to be part of a small community to understand the intimacy, the interpersonal relationships, the pride and pleasure of community accomplishments," she says. "Especially accomplishments everyone feels they can share."

Joey Struwe's basketball team making the state tournament, she thinks everyone would agree, was that kind of accomplishment.

The down side?

"You are always readily available for discussion and criticism," she says, adding the town itself becomes an easy target to lash out at when personal frustrations mount. "And sometimes there's very real frustration with the economic situation."

Residents who boast there's no drug problem here ignore what Goodfellow calls Estelline's "drug of choice" — alcohol. She feels the lack of social outlets makes drinking so acceptable that many adults turn their heads to adolescent drinking. Goodfellow recently started an awareness group for students grades 7-12 who are children of alcoholics. Fifteen attend regularly. She also chairs a Drug and Alcohol Prevention Team which tries "to impact students and their decision making about substances." The team is a coalition of school and community professionals: teachers, the county health nurse, the county sheriff and a deputy, Estelline's two policemen, two ministers, and two business people.

But there's a point, says Goodfellow, where communication between human services providers breaks down. Teachers and other school personnel know students, and in many cases their families, well. They could be invaluable resources for Department of Social Services child protection workers, or juvenile court workers, or for when kids need the state mental health system or psychiatric hospital in Sioux Falls. But, in an environment where working together should be easy, these agencies work independently, seldom even communicating with others who serve the same children.

Goodfellow feels school restructuring and community cooperation should start with new professional alliances to reach children most in need.

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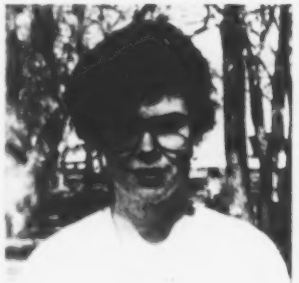
Brandi Lamster is one of 16 Estelline class of 1991 members. She signed up for Rural Economics to learn more about Estelline and to have an active learning experience. She thinks the town will support the project.

TAKINI: Quest for self-determi



Brandi Lamster

"A lot of people in the community want kids to get involved," she says.

Brandi moved to Estelline from a large Omaha school in fourth grade. She considers Estelline's small class sizes and teachers' individual attention real advantages. She sits with classmate Lance Goeman. Like most residents, the two are frank discussing both advantages and disadvantages of living here.

Everyone knows one another and, says Lance, "That's both good and bad."

While Brandi feels lack of entertainment is a disadvantage, she adds that it works into an advantage of sorts for the school. Estelline considers school plays, concerts, and games significant events. A glance at this week's Estelline Journal affirms that. The lead story is a report on last week's high school play and 12 of 19 articles are school news.

Neither Brandi nor Lance finds the notion of living here as adults unattractive. Lance sees little chance of that for himself, though. He wants to go to college to become a broadcast journalist and that's not a local career option. Brandi, on the other hand, hopes to enroll in a Minnesota commercial art program. Returning to Estelline as a self-employed commercial artist isn't out of the question. She recently obtained a sales tax license so she can sell original-design T-shirts. She hopes to learn more about business operations in Rural Economics.

Brandi and Lance are asked to predict how many of their class of 16 will be in Estelline ten years after graduation. They don't answer with a percentage or an arbitrary guess. They think a long while, considering each classmate individually.

Lance guesses three. Brandi says five or six.

The Missouri River marks the beginning of the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation

West of Estelline the landscape changes. The lakes disappear. There are fewer trees, more distance between farm houses, and corn and soybean fields give way to grazing lands. U.S. Highway 212 bridges the Missouri River 180 miles from Estelline. Ahead the view suggests not the Midwest, but the West: a treeless prairie broken here and there by high buttes.

The river marks the beginning of the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation. It's an area the size of Connecticut where just 7,000 people live. This is the land of the Lakota Sioux, the Miniconjue, subject to their own tribal government and courts. The people, when they must distinguish between themselves and whites, usually call themselves Indians, not Native Americans. They will talk about their obvious poverty but are quick to add that demographics don't tell the whole story. They speak of a growing sense of community and of a need to address long-standing problems their own way.

Some are having to change their view of schools to include them as part of the new community movement. "School" still conjures images of the old boarding schools, started when the reservation was set up a century ago. Some were federal, some parochial.

"Boarding schools meant children left their families for long periods of time," says Larry Mendoza, himself Indian and elementary principal at Takini School. "Boarding schools were very strict. You weren't allowed to speak the Lakota language. The push was to urbanize Indians, get them off the land and into the cities."

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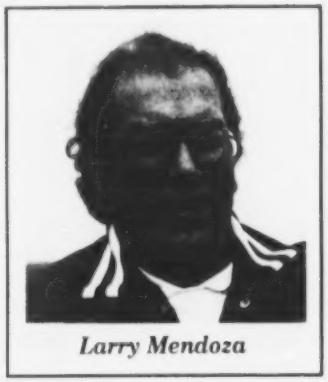

Larry Mendoza

Mendoza says today's students are the first generation to get away from boarding schools. Children coming home from school each afternoon have made people think more about what happens there. Self-determination has become a major issue the past ten years. That means local school boards with real authority. Traditionally the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has run schools from distant federal offices and local boards have been advisory only. When a reservation community decides it wants a "contract grant school," funding still comes from the BIA but the local board is in charge.

Takini School, a new and pedestrian brick building, sits in isolation on the reservation's west side nearly a hundred miles from the Missouri. It opened in the fall of 1989 to 258 students, K-12. It operates as a contract grant school but was planned as a BIA school. Site and design decisions were made in New Mexico which, teachers say, explains why it's built on this windswept plain where rattlesnakes are playground hazards. No one lives nearby; students are bussed an average of 20 miles one-way. The location was chosen because it's an equal distance from the villages of Bridger, Cherry Creek, and Red Scaffold.

It made sense on a map.

"No school building plan should be finalized without the input of the community that will use it," says superintendent Ken Englehardt. The nearest services — gas, and a place to buy a can of pop or mail a letter — are 12 miles away.

Many parents have no cars and must be bussed to teacher conferences. Unemployment on the reservation as a whole runs 70 to 85 percent, depending on the season. Right here it's worse — probably 95 or 97 percent.

"The school is really the only employer," says Englehardt, which puts his staff in a peculiar position for teachers. They are the "haves," their neighbors the "have nots." Teachers must be careful how they address problems so parents won't think them elitist.

Indian teachers are hard to come by. They hold just six of Takini's 22 teaching positions. Sometimes any teacher is hard to come by. Being unable to fill all positions looms as a frightening possibility. The fact that the BIA is increasing teacher salaries to Department of Defense levels over the next couple years — significantly more than other South Dakota teacher salaries — may help.

A long hall runs east to west through Takini School. Primary students start at the east end and will, over the years, move toward high school rooms on the west end. But most don't make it to the end. If today's eighth graders follow established patterns, just 20 percent will be here in four years to get a diploma.

Still there's a good feeling in this building, a rare sense of closeness. Students call teachers by their first names. Some call special teachers "auntie" or "grandma," names with deep significance in a culture where extended family represents the ultimate sense of belonging.

Seventy-five percent of high school students have enrolled in Bernie Hickenbotham's shop classes. Still, the classes are small enough that everyone can crowd around a table for hands-on learning. This morning they are learning about electricity by wiring a string of lights. Everyone's involved. The mood is one of gentle banter between teacher and students.

Across the hall, Steve Petz's Careers Class consists of five teenagers sitting on a couch. They discuss themselves, their goals, the perceptions outsiders have of them.

They say they listen to rock music from a Rapid City radio station. They don't watch much TV; there's no cable, no MTV. Sometimes they're bored. All agree someone should open a recreation center. Outsiders, they say, sometimes look at the reservation and think the only answer must be to get away. They all know older kids who left for college or the military and came back, but they don't think those people returned because they couldn't cope with the outside world... a common perception.

"This is their home," says Lanny LaPlante. He's a senior planning to enter the military after graduation and maybe eventually become a physical therapist.

Lanny thinks there's a sense of freedom here most teenagers don't know. He says, "You can go out the door running in any direction."

After class Petz says he expects a graduating class of 13 this spring. Seven are looking at state university programs, two at the military and "some of the rest have children of their own which makes it difficult to plan."

Petz finds it hard to talk about careers when many students "don't see parents getting up and going to work. It's not something within their experience." He'd like to schedule field trips to see various businesses and occupations. That means driving to towns a hundred miles away.

He thinks some economic development here would retain and bring back graduates who could improve the quality of life. But it would have to be businesses with local roots. That turns the discussion to a patch of land behind Takini School.

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Takini is seeking a grant for an odd auxiliary building on that piece of land. It seems no one cares much for the generic main building, but that no one can help getting excited about the new one.

Some call it "the arena." Some call it the "ag building" or "vocational building." One thing's for sure. It will be built to meet needs unique to the Cheyenne River Reservation.

The building's middle will be an enclosed arena. Rodeo is a major sport here. And pow wows — two or three days of traditional dancing and other ceremonies, and a time for long visits with friends — are community celebrations with no real parallel in white society. The arena will be able to host rodeos and pow wows any time of year. A dozen classrooms built along the building's edge will have doors opening outside and also "storefronts" opening into the arena.

Shop class

Hickenbotham sees classes on culturally relevant entrepreneurship happening in those rooms. Students already have ideas for the storefronts. Rodeos and pow wows mean people buying food, gifts. Students have talked about running food concessions and making and selling artifacts and horse halters and bull ropes.

That's led to discussions about other things their neighbors could use: trailer house steps, corral sections, affordable furniture.

Hickenbotham doesn't see teaching entrepreneurship from a book. The key, he thinks, is understanding local needs. He knows a young man in a nearby town, for example, who had a successful idea that would have probably worked nowhere but the reservation. The young man made iron grave markers in an area where honoring the dead is especially important and where people can't afford marble markers. People bought his markers and used them for graves dating back to 1915.

Mendoza says there's not much agriculture on the reservation's west side. Maybe the rodeo pens could be used to help students learn about raising livestock. He also thinks students could manufacture things area schools are buying out-of-state like letter jackets and trophies. Maybe students could get businesses started in school and keep them after graduation. Mendoza also sees day-care services in the new building, allowing students with children to get their diplomas.

Something about the new building seems to generate ideas.

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Lots of good ideas, though, get lost in the gloom of the reservation's number one problem. The tribe estimates 95 percent of reservation residents are directly or indirectly affected by alcohol and other drug abuse. Some Takini teachers say that's a conservative estimate. One theory holds that alcohol was a weapon the government used in hopes of destroying these people.

Whatever the history, the effects on Takini children are brutal. Of 311 substantiated child abuse and neglect cases across the reservation last year, more than 90 percent were triggererd by alcohol. Everyone knows the 311 figure represents a tiny fraction of actual cases. Teachers speak of families shattered by alcohol, of molestation in homes where ten or more people share a bedroom, of seven-year-olds who are responsible for younger siblings days at a time.

The school building is completely drug and alcohol free. There's not even a smoking area for teachers. Students, says superintendent Englehardt, must see the school as "a safe environment, free of pressures to drink or take drugs, staffed by people who will help however they can."

LaVonne Dupris, the school's full-time alcohol and drug counselor, works in all classrooms. She's using the school building for Alateen meetings. She's inviting the community to programs on "prevention and intervention."

Next year the school will open a special coping room. Students devastated by weekend drinking in their homes come to school Mondays tired, hungry, and emotionally spent. By Thursday they may be bracing themselves for the coming weekend. The room's staff will help students recover and prepare. Students themselves will decide curriculum topics. Much of what they'll need to talk about, teachers predict, will be issues of survival like, "What should I do if there's a fire and all the adults are too drunk to help?"

Gene Thin Elk, a healer and writer, believes Indians here are dealing with three cultures: Indian, white, and the culture of alcoholism... "a culture in itself, a whole way of life, a whole belief system, a whole value system."

Thin Elk says the alcoholic culture will disappear only when replaced by another powerful set of values. He advocates teaching young people traditional Lakota ways. A society committed to true Lakota beliefs would see alcohol and drug abuse as defiling the sacredness of all living things, and the Earth Mother. Thin Elk also thinks students should be told the world needs to hear about their culture.

"We have a connectedness to the origins of our people," he tells a meeting of Takini teachers and school board members. "The teachings of our people are still among us — the songs, the dances, the ceremonies. Many cultures are separated from that. They're longing for that touch, that connectedness."

He sees opportunities for picking up on learning styles evident in ceremonial music, colors, and movement. New curriculums, he warns, must be sensitive to differences in white and Indian perceptions. For example, both cultures put much importance on the family. But family in the white culture means the nuclear family. Here it means aunts, uncles, cousins, complex assortments of in-laws... maybe 200 or more people.

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The Lakota language — rhythmic and low — is spoken either as the primary or secondary tongue in 90 percent of Takini students' homes. It is central to traditional ceremonies. If it is lost, a whole level of cultural consciousness disappears forever.

Takini School is 180 degrees from the boarding schools that forbade speaking Lakota. The school is seeking federal funding to begin a bilingual program. Dave Bald Eagle, a volunteer who lives nearby, is helping elementary students understand the language.

Superintendent Englehardt thinks it is vital the school be seen as open to that kind of local involvement. It's important to get adults into the building. The reservation's community college uses Takini rooms for classes. The auxiliary building, of course, could make the school a communtiy center for a wide region. Englehardt wants to structure the school calendar to allow for four-day weekends built around positive community events like pow wows.

Long weekends could also be used for the field trips Steve Petz wants to arrange.

After the students are gone teachers talk, sometimes emotionally, about the admiration they have for these students.

"The significant thing is these kids — the ones who come to school — are making it," says Bernie Hickenbotham.

For now, students and teachers travel 20 miles to a building planned for them by distant bureaucrats. The demographics seem overwhelming. But the spirit of self-determination is real. Someday the building out back will be real, too. In Lakota "takini" means "survivor."

BELLE FOURCHE: Dreams of a school of the future

Black Hills Roundup

Highway 212 bends to the south 40 miles west of the Cheyenne River Reservation. Suddenly the Black Hills, still an hour away, stand sharp against the horizon. They're really pine-clad mountains, sacred to the plains Indians, a destination for 1876 goldrushers and modern day tourists.

Belle Fourche is built in craggy foothills at the northern tip of the Hills range. With a population of a little less than 5000 Belle Fourche is, by South Dakota standards, almost too big to be called rural. Main Street has lost shops in recent years but an industrial park north of town has attracted some light industry. Black Hills tourists, an Air Force bomb wing, and nearby bentonite fields boost the economy.

But above all, this is ranch country. At the Belle Cafe diners talk about the dry spring's effect on the range land. Posters on the cafe bulletin board advertise bull sales at the Craft Angus Ranch and N Lazy L Ranch. Belle Fourche once shipped more cattle by train than any railhead in the West. July Fourth week still pulls in 7,000 fans for the Black Hills Roundup, one of the West's oldest and most famous rodeos.

"Some people are embarrassed about being a cowtown," says chamber of commerce director Kathy Wainman. She smiles. "I guess we could say we're rich in western heritage instead. Either way, it's time to capitalize on what we really are."

Wainman and her husband moved to Belle in 1978 when he took a law enforcement job. She was from Montana, he from Indiana, and they figured to move on after a couple years. Instead they stayed. They liked the way people made them feel at home. Their three children liked the individual attention they got at school.

Now, Wainman says, the school system is a force in helping Belle remember what it is and seeing what it might become. Three years ago the high school was where Estelline is now: just deciding to play a role in community development. A Research and Development class surveyed the local business climate for the chamber. A Rural Economics class worked with a Main Street revitalization group and mapped the town for the 1990 census. Any skepticism about the students' abilities vanished in February, 1990. Rural Economics students got Belle certified as a GOLD community — meaning it's listed in the governor's Guide to Opportunities for Local Development, a directory for national business recruitment. The GOLD project meant months of targeting tasks, designating task forces, and careful documentation, as well as ongoing work after the certification was granted.

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If business people see GOLD as a crowning accomplishment, teachers tend to view it as one in a series of things they've learned students can do given the right opportunity. They say they've moved toward a "classroom without walls" concept the past three years.

In addition to Research and Development and Rural Economics, a restructured journalism class puts students into the community to write for the local paper and radio station. A historiography class has members interviewing senior citizens and digging through court house records; the class has compiled its own local history publications and used some stories for dramatic readings. Students heard about entrepreneurship from local business people and formed a corporation for a school store.

"We've created people who feel they can be part of a community," says economics teacher Curt Shaw.

Journalism teacher Linda Rothermel stresses they're not saying everyone should stay in rural America. "But that is one option. And really the rest of the world is small communities, too, whether they are other rural towns or urban neighborhoods. Learning to function in a community doesn't change too much from environment to environment."

Jean Helmer, who has taught Research and Development and historiography, believes involving students in course planning has been important.

"We believe in ownership," she says. "Students who help plan own the results."

Helmer has been so impressed by students' ideas that she finds herself going up to graduates at basketball games and asking, "What do you wish we'd taught you?"

Is there a danger of limiting students' world views by putting too much emphasis on the local community?

"That's a legitimate concern," says Mike Pangburn. He also has taught Research and Development and heads the drama department where students recently staged The Diary of Anne Frank. "We have to guard against that, to see what we're doing here as a foundation for broader learning. More than ever before it's important to study other cultures. But how do you study other cultures if you don't understand your own?"

Visitors might wonder how Belle's culture could be a mystery to anyone. Tangible signs are everywhere, from the historic rodeo grounds to wide streets built to accommodate cattle drives. A high ridge south of town, where the air smells of pine and sage, may be the spot where French explorers saw the union of two small rivers and called the spot "belle fourche"... beautiful fork.

Historic and beautiful or not, young people say admitting you're from Belle Fourche isn't always easy.

"People from away are surprised we have electricity and bathrooms," says Brian Madden, one of 76 1990 graduating seniors.

"I grew up being told the only way to make something of yourself was to get out of here," says a senior girl. Her parents were especially negative. She believed the whole town was ashamed of itself until she got into the GOLD project. She was impressed by people she met who cared about Belle, especially those willing to volunteer time to make it better.

Senior Charles Tryon feels the classroom without walls approach has bridged gaps between older and younger residents. "That's been the best thing," agrees classmate Tami Weaver.

Both students and teachers admit to some outright mistakes and false starts. An early Research and Development survey offended people because it asked sensitive questions about personal finances. The school store corporation "took on a personality of its own"... a personality from which students felt free to steal, even though they were part of the corporation. A businessman told teachers that kind of stealing is a common phenomenon in the world of commerce. Teachers chalked the experience up as an unintentional "psychology lab."

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Paul Dingeman

Paul Dingeman's roots are deep. His grandparents homesteaded just down the road from Belle Fourche. He's been an educator for 25 years, 12 as high school principal here. His office reflects an environment he considers healthy for learning. Students feel free to visit with secretaries, to step through Dingeman's door to ask questions or just say good morning. That personal interaction and easy access is part of what small towns are all about, Dingeman says.

He likes the way the classroom without walls concept has made his teachers think. Curt Shaw wants to encourage adults to attend his classes. Mike Pangburn sees taking broad issues — the environment or homelessness, for example — and relating them to many academic disciplines. And Dingeman has his own vision of "a dream school of the future."

"To survive rural communities have to become one extended family, one interactive, collaborative system," he says. "I'm talking about severe restructuring not only in schools, but in community functioning."

Dingeman can empathize with Barb Goodfellow's frustrations in Estelline about addressing the needs of troubled youth. His staff "knows better than anyone" who comes from problem homes, who's at risk for addiction or prison. Talk of restructuring is pointless, he says, unless it addresses that population. Hand Dingeman a piece of paper and he'll draw a model of his dream school. The school becomes the hub of a system linking law enforcement, social services, mental health programs, even senior citizen services. He envisions shared expertise, communication between professionals who know and respect each other, and an opportunity for more relevant professional training.

"We have social workers today being trained in college programs that prepare you to work the same way whether you're in New York or Belle Fourche," he says. Why not provide social workers additional training about local problems and unique resources before they begin work in Belle? Likewise, why not train policemen to "serve their own people" rather than expecting them to model their work after urban police forces?

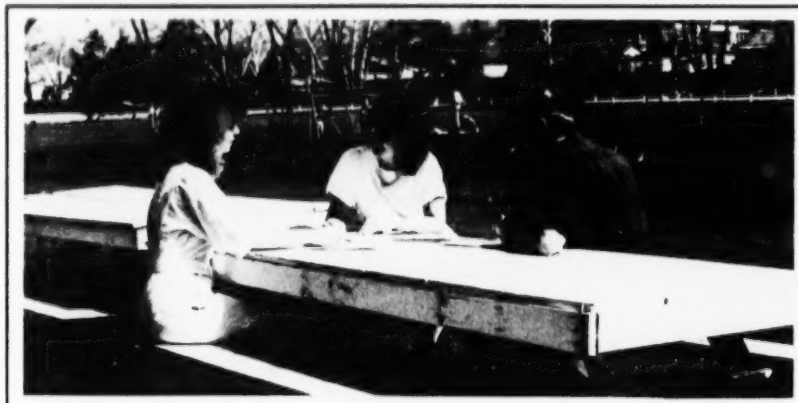
But those are dreams. Reality right now is a staff of teachers worried about next year's budget cuts. And lack of materials with which to prepare students for the information age is an ongoing frustration.

"The colleges are not providing us with materials to teach as we must in this age," says Dingeman. "Our teachers are having to develop their own."

He thinks restructuring will really take off only when schools can train teachers to change, when schools reach the "probably 90 percent of teachers who have never considered other ways to give students knowledge." Rural schools — "without the bureaucracy, the overwhelming numbers" — would be logical national labs for that kind of development.

But that brings up another issue: There would have to be good salaries to keep teachers in these rural labs over the long haul. Dingeman knows well the frustration of developing teachers just out of college, only to see them move to better paying positions after obtaining a couple years' experience.

Unfortunately, students aren't the only ones conditioned to think the way to make something of yourself is to get out of Belle Fouche.



Tallying a community survey.

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